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ABSTRACT

St. Petersburg Junior College's Project Success provides mentoring and other special support services to students with low placement test scores. Teachers, librarians, counselors, and other staff members meet, usually on a weekly basis, with five students per semester to provide support and assistance with problems. The mentors receive reports on the students' in-class progress three times a semester, and work with the students to make necessary adjustments in study strategies, course attendance, etc. In addition to ongoing tutorial services available at the Alternate Instruction Center, special writing skills workshops are provided each week. Because of the high proportion of minority and English as a Second Language students in Project Success, special efforts are made in the writing workshops to: (1) encourage bonding between project students and staff; (2) validate the students' dialects; (3) use interactive play to explain sentence structure; (4) help students learn to back up their points; (5) find something to praise; and (6) instill in students a sense of responsibility for their own learning. The success of the workshops is evidenced by the fact that no student who has regularly attended sessions has failed an English class at the college during the 4 years of the program. (EJV)

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WRITING SKILLS FOR DEVELOPMENTAL STUDENTS

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Project Success, a program begun at St. Petersburg Junior College in 1983, is having significant success at retaining high risk, under-prepared students in degree seeking programs. Begun in an effort to retain minority students and based upon a mentoring concept, Project Success provides a variety of special support services designed to assist under-prepared entering college freshmen identified by placement testing. Those students with the lowest placement scores are recommended to Project Success, but priority is given to Black students. Approximately 80% of those in the program are either Black or ESL students.

Mentors are crucial to the effectiveness of the program. Teaching faculty, librarians, counselors and other staff members serve as mentors to five students each semester. Chosen because they are supportive and capable of being effective advocates for the students assigned to their charge, mentors meet with their Project Success students, usually on a weekly basis, to see how things are going and to assist with problem solutions.

Progress reports are collected three times a semester from instructors teaching students in the program. These reports ask about grades, attendance, needed improvement and for recommendations about how we could better assist the

student. Mentors share these reports with the student so necessary adjustments can be made in study strategies, etc. We find that especially first semester students think "everything's fine" when that simply is not the case.

Special survival workshops for English/writing and math are held two hours a week for Project Success students. This service is in addition to assistance available on an ongoing basis from the Alternate Instruction Center which offers tutoring five days and four nights a week.

Project Success' Writing Skills Workshop, offered two hours weekly at times convenient to most students, is designed to provide a tutorial buffer between the student and any class which requires him to write. Motivational techniques such as written reports from instructors, letters, cartoons, and personal and phone contacts are employed to try to lead the student to available help.

In the workshop students work either in groups or individually as needed. It's not unusual to see one student playing God over a stack of note cards for a research paper while someone else is reworking a paragraph for a developmental class and two or three others are working on dialect problems.

The large number of Project Success students from minority populations warrants special attention being paid to dialect difficulties. Lots of stories are used in the process of making points, and positive reinforcement is the keynote. We always try to "make the writing even better"

instead of letting a student think his writing is poor or ill thought out. Nurturing and good parenting techniques are baselines in instructional methods.

Black, Asian and Hispanic are the three ethnic groups most prevalent in Project Success. The literature tells us that a very heavy emphasis on family loyalty is a primary characteristic of each of these groups of students; thus, we try to build on this strength in the workshop. Specifically we employ several stragegies with each student coming in for assistance:

1. BONDING - This involves common ground building and discovery of strengths as well as weaknesses. The students are more willing to learn when they know they <u>really</u> matter. Obviously an introductory conference is needed to encourage this bonding to occur
2. VALIDATION OF THE STUDENT'S DIALECT - All dialect problems come from legitimate sources. For example, Black dialect problems can be traced to the original African dialect syntax that was absorbed into American Black speech patterns. Language patterns used CORRECTLY in the original dialect are marked WRONG in our classes. Few students know that in a sense they are doing something very RIGHT (albeit misunderstood). Comparative grammar considerations between Standard American English, and Spanish and Asian languages yield the same validation.

3. SENTENCES MAKE SENSE - Interactive demonstration of subject - verb - object is used. Then we hang on modifiers, first adjectives weighing down and changing the character of nouns, and then adverbs "messing up" the meaning of verbs. In short, we try to make a game of sentence structure using interactive play. A love of play acting and a sense of the dramatic do help here! Sounds elementary and perhaps patronizing, doesn't it? But you'd be AMAZED at the number of students who claim (and I think they're telling the truth) that they NEVER KNEW the real meaning of a sentence.
4. IT'S NOT TRUE BECAUSE YOU SAY SO - An incredible number of these (and other) students don't know how to back up what they say, so we apply proving one's point to something really important like, say, "Why So and So is a 'fox,'" "Why government or sociology...class is such a drag," or "Why I should get a raise on the job." After learning a bit about the student, it's easy to find an appropriate concept to prove. Many students gather information thoughtfully for the first time when it's made into a game for them. The good thing about the workshop setting is that immediate positive reinforcement is possible. The real world expects us to THINK, not just to "SAY THINGS." Thus we present these skills as a REAL WORLD bonus.
5. LAUGH A LOT AND YOU'LL LOVE IT - People are smart enough to not like what they're not good at. Our students have

few illusions about their competency (or lack of it) when it comes to English and (dread of all dreads) writing. No wonder they don't like it! Thus in the workshop WE STRESS THE GOOD STUFF...always striving to find something to laugh about that will build up the student. Care must be taken to NEVER belittle an idea because that belittles the student. FIND SOMETHING GOOD ABOUT IT! It's there if we look.

6. WE HAVE LOTS IN COMMON - I happen to be significantly learning disabled. Underprepared students also have a disability, whether it's clinical or not. I use my disability to build a bridge to my developmental students and serve as living, breathing proof that IF YOU WANT TO DO IT AND YOU'RE WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING, even teach college English! I confess I exploit this with some success.
7. YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN SALVATION - Ultimately the price for learning (and there IS a price) must be borne by the LEARNER, not the TEACHER. Overnight miracle cures simply don't happen; therefore, we must encourage inner motivation of self. Ask the student just how high a price (s)he is willing to pay to achieve the goal. Often I'm tempted in my classes to say "learn a little, and it'll make a big difference." You and I know, however, that there's just enough truth in that statement for it to be insidious. With my Project Success students I find that ABSOLUTE HONESTY is

of critical importance. I don't make false promises, but I do promise to help and love the student while the student helps him(her)self.

The testament of the workshop's success is the students themselves: no student who has faithfully attended sessions has failed an English class at SPJC in the four years the workshop has been in existence.

Currently 110 students participate in Project Success on the St. Petersburg campus. In 1983 Project Success students had an average 1.8 G.P.A. while a like sample (same reading score but predominantly white students) had an average 2.2 G.P.A., and the total school population had an average 2.7 G.P.A. In 1987 Project Success G.P.A. had risen to 2.32, while the like sample was 2.37, and the total population was 2.6. In 1983 the average load attempted was 10.6 semester hours for Project Success students, 9.8 semester hours for the like sample, and 8.6 semester hours for the general population. In 1987 the attempted load was 8.3 for Project Success, 8.6 for the like sample, and 9.8 for the general popualtion.

Obviously Project Success students are competing more successfully with the general population now than they were in 1983. We feel that this is due, at least in part, to the effectiveness of the workshop.

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